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High-tech tools make marketing materials shine

E-BIZ

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Professionalism is critical to the survival of your small business, particularly when it comes to the information that you provide about you and your company.

Even though we live in an era of marketing on the Internet, many business people still rely on old-fashioned paper. So when you prepare client proposals, brochures, business cards or other paper-based promotional materials, you should make sure that you don't come across as an amateur.

Fortunately, there is quite a bit of technology available to help you look as good as you are. First, desktop publishing software will go a long way in helping you generate quality materials.

For several years, the Microsoft Publisher program has been used to generate my company brochures and other information, even business cards. While some criticize these kinds of programs because they use predesigned templates, the final product doesn't have to look second-rate.

The other tool that has greatly enhanced my marketing materials is a digital camera. With it, I've been able to incorporate into my promotional items quite a few photographs relevant to the message at hand.

Of course, you've got to be able to print something on paper that matches the quality of what you generate on screen. I've invested in a colour printer, at a cost of about $400 or $500, and have had a laser printer for years. Both are fabulous tools when a good-looking piece of paper, such as a client proposal, has to be prepared in a hurry.

But the cost of ink and special paper can sometimes be excessive, particularly if you are looking at producing more than a few copies from your colour printer.

That's why it's a good idea to get to know the folks at the local printing shop. By learning more about the shop's technology, I can have it print computer files in large volumes quickly and for a relatively low cost on its high-speed colour copier/printer.

To do so, the shop has provided a printer driver that I installed on my computer. When I'm ready to have it print a document on my behalf, I simply choose its printer from the list of available printers on my personal computer.

A file is created containing special computer codes that tell the high-speed printer how to output my document. I take that file to the shop on a floppy disk, or better yet, send it via the Internet. It can then generate the hundreds of pages of the original document for a fraction of the cost of doing it myself.

The result is a solution for high-volume situations. Many small print shops across the country have similar capabilities.

Such electronic printing possibilities are becoming quite widespread in the industry and increasingly sophisticated. I recently received a brochure from a giant printing company will now generate short-run promotional materials of a quality normally received for large businesses, such as banks or car companies.

We're talking heavy-paper, four-colour brochures. The ballpark cost — if I design the material myself — to print 500 8½-by-11-inch copies of a high-quality brochure for about $500. It works the same way — a file has to be generated in one of the formats that the company accepts and is then sent. The printer can turn the job around within a day.

What if you go the route of making your promotional materials available in electronic form on the Internet as well? The standard is Adobe Acrobat (**www.adobe.com**), a product that lets you take your brochure, and instead of printing it to paper, it creates an electronic document.

These documents can be made available on your World Wide Web site and viewed by anyone with the appropriate Acrobat software, which can be downloaded for free. The beauty is that people can see on the Internet exactly what you have made available on paper. Every time they download an electronic brochure, you save a bit of money.

What this means is that the world of professional printing is available to any small-business person, for a fraction of the cost of a few years ago.

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